

3 DONKEY'S AND THE COYOTE

START



**CHEATING AND TAKING SHORTCUTS
BY LORI RANDOLPH**

The morning sun was just beginning to peek over the jagged red mesas, painting the desert in shades of gold and orange. Durango was already up, trotting toward the old wooden fence at the edge of the canyon. A dusty, colorful flyer was flapping wildly in the breeze, pinned to a cactus by a rusted nail.

Durango squinted at the bold, ink-smudged letters. His ears perked up, and a wide grin spread across his face. He didn't waste a second—he kicked up his heels and galloped back to the shade of the big mesquite tree where his friends were still shaking off the sleep.

The Big Announcement

"Wake up, fellas! You won't believe it!" Durango shouted, skidding to a halt. Dugger blinked his sleepy eyes, while Digger let out a long, slow yawn.

Durango: "Guess what? We just entered a donkey race! The grand prize is a whole year's supply of T-bone steaks, fresh fruit, and crisp vegetables—plus a massive, shiny medal!"

Dugger: "We did? Really?"

Digger: "Aw, man! I'm way too slow to win a race."

Durango: "Don't count us out yet, Digger! Besides, if you see a snake take a shortcut, don't follow it. They might cross the finish line first, but that's just cheating."

Digger: "I know... it was a nice thought, though. Honestly, I'd just be thrilled to actually see a snake for once!"

The three donkeys are now loaded onto Buford and are ready to go. They take off for Oakman. A flyer flies out the window and lands on Snarly's head.

Snarly: "Who turned out the lights?"

Clemento grabs the flyer off Snarly's head.

Clemento: "Give me that. Let's see what this is... a race! And the winner gets a year's supply of T-bone steaks, and so on and so forth."

Snarly: "Yummy, boss!"

Clemento: "Where there's a donkey event, you'll find Durango, Dugger, and Digger. We need a plan so we can win those T-bone steaks."

Clemento pulled a dusty chalkboard out from under a pile of old tires and set it up in the center of their hideout. He drew a messy map of the racecourse through Oakman.

Clemento: "Alright, Snarly, pay attention. To win those steaks, we don't just need to be fast—we need to be clever. Durango and his brothers are strong, but they follow the trail. We are going to find a shortcut through Briar Patch Canyon."

Snarly: (Scratching his head) "But boss, isn't that place full of... well, briars?"

Clemento: "Exactly! No donkey would ever think to go that way. While they're busy taking the long road around the mountain, we'll be sliding right through the middle. We'll pop out at the finish line before they even reach the halfway mark!"

Snarly: (Eyes widening) "And then... the T-bones?"

Clemento: "Mountains of them, Snarly! Mountains of juicy, delicious T-bones. But first, we need to make sure Durango, Dugger, and Digger don't suspect a thing. We'll pretend we're just there to cheer them on."

Clemento let out a devious chuckle as he began sketching a fake "good luck" banner. The race was on, and the coyote was sure his plan was foolproof.

Snarly: "Every time Digger sees me, he turns into a fast donkey!"

Clemento: "I've got an idea. You scare Digger so he runs like the wind, and then you haul it out of there before anyone sees you. Got it, Snarly?"

Snarly: "Got it, boss!"

Down at the starting line, the three donkeys are geared up. Buford is lining them up as the crowd cheers.

Durango: "Remember, no cheating! Do your hardest and enjoy the day."

Dugger: "I will, Durango! I'm here to have fun, but I do love winning!"

As the whistle blows, the donkeys take off. While Durango and Dugger stay on the main path, Clemento signals Snarly to head toward the Briar Patch Canyon shortcut. Snarly waits behind a large rock, ready to jump out and give Digger the "boost" he needs to accidentally help Clemento's team win the T-bone steaks.

Should Snarly's scare tactic work too well and cause a total pile-up, or does Digger end up running so fast he wins the race for himself?

The Dirty Trick

As the race kicks off, Durango, Dugger, and Digger are neck-and-neck, keeping it fair and square just like Durango said. But Clemento has other plans. He isn't even on the track—he's hiding in the bushes with a bag of "special" donkey treats.

Clemento: "Hey, Snarly! Forget the scare tactic. If we can't outrun 'em, we'll just make sure they can't run at all!"

He whistles, and as the three brothers gallop past, Clemento tosses the treats right into their

path. But these aren't normal treats—they're "Sleepy-Time Suds."

Digger: "Ooh, a snack! Durango, look!"

Before Durango can stop him, Digger gulps one down. Suddenly, his legs start wobbling like jelly.

Digger: "Is it just me, or did the ground turn into a giant marshmallow?"

While the three brothers are stumbling around, confused and sleepy, Snarly zips past them on a scooter he hidden in the tall grass—which is definitely against the rules!

Snarly: "See ya at the finish line, slowpokes! Those T-bones are mine!"

Clemento: (Laughing from the bushes) "He's cheating broadly, and they don't even know it yet!"

The Great Awakening

Durango: "Dugger! Digger! Wake up! That wasn't a snack—it was a trap!"

Digger: (Snoring loudly) "Mmm... giant marshmallows..."

Durango spots a nearby water trough used for the racers. He doesn't have time for a gentle wake-up call. He uses his powerful back legs to buck the edge of the trough, sending a massive tidal wave of cold water crashing over his brothers.

Dugger & Digger: "WAAAH! I'M AWAKE!"

Durango: "Snarly is cheating his way to our T-bones on a scooter! We have to catch him!"

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As the brothers charge forward, Clemento pulls out his final trick. He knows Digger is terrified of snakes, so he points toward a narrow, overgrown side-path.

The Snake Pit Shortcut

Clemento: "Hey, Digger! If you want to beat Snarly, take the 'Serpent Slide' shortcut! It's much faster!"

Digger: "Serpent? As in... snakes? I don't like the sound of that, Clemento!"

Durango: "Don't listen to him, Digger! It's another trap!"

But in the heat of the race, Digger gets separated. He accidentally takes a wrong turn and finds himself in a dark, vine-covered gully. Suddenly, he hears a low hissing sound from the bushes.

Digger: (Freezing in place) "Uh-oh. My hooves are shaking. Is that a vine... or a very long, scaly friend?"

He's so spooked that he's completely lost his way! Meanwhile, Snarly is laughing as he pulls ahead on the main road, thinking he has the race in the bag.

Dugger: "Durango, we can't leave him! Digger is paralyzed with fear!"

Durango: "You're right. Steaks don't matter if we don't have our brother. Change of plans—we're going into the Serpent Slide!"

Step 1: The Master Plan

Durango and Dugger skid to a halt at the edge of the dark gully. They see Digger shivering, his eyes squeezed shut, convinced he's surrounded by a hundred cobras.

Durango: "Dugger, we need to get him out of there, but he won't move as long as he thinks there are snakes. We need to become something scarier than a snake!"

Dugger: "Like what? A giant mountain lion? A dragon?"

Durango: "Better. A Mega-Donkey!"

Step 2: The Mega-Donkey Disguise

Working fast, Dugger hops onto Durango's back. They find an old, discarded tarp and some long sticks near the trail. They drape the tarp over themselves, using the sticks to make it look like they have giant, pointy wings and multiple heads.

Dugger: (In a deep, booming voice) "BEHOLD! THE GREAT SHADOW-BEAST HAS ARRIVED!"

Digger: (Peeking through one eye) "A... a Shadow-Beast? Is it here to eat the snakes?"

Durango: "YES! AND IT ONLY EATS DONKEYS WHO STAND STILL! RUN, DIGGER! RUN TOWARD THE LIGHT!"

Step 3: The Great Escape

The sight of the "Mega-Donkey" is so much scarier than any snake that Digger forgets his fear and bolts out of the gully like a rocket. Durango and Dugger toss off the disguise and gallop right behind him, using the momentum to blast back onto the main track.

Digger: "I'm alive! I outran the snakes and the Shadow-Beast!"

They look ahead and see Snarly and Clemento almost at the finish line, celebrating early.

Clemento: "We did it! The steaks are ours!"

Snarly: "Wait... Boss... what is that thundering sound?"

Should the brothers zoom past them at the very last second, or should they use the tarp disguise one more time to spook Snarly off his scooter?

With the brothers back on track and charging toward the finish line, here is how the race concludes:

The Final Stretch

The dust cloud from the three brothers is so massive that Clemento and Snarly think a literal storm is coming. Snarly is frantically pushing his scooter, his little legs kicking as fast as they can, but the donkey trio is closing the gap!

Snarly: "Boss! They're coming! They're coming like a freight train!"

Clemento: "Quick, Snarly! The line is right there! Just another ten feet!"

But Digger, still riding the high of outrunning the "Shadow-Beast," lets out a triumphant bray that echoes through the canyon. He pulls ahead of even Durango and Dugger, his fear turned into pure, unfiltered speed.

The Photo Finish

Just as Snarly's scooter reaches the chalk line, Digger leaps over him in a magnificent arc.

1st Place: Digger (The Brave-ish)

2nd Place: Durango & Dugger (The Loyal Leaders)

DNF: Snarly (Disqualified for illegal scooter use)

Buford walks over to the panting donkeys and hands Digger a giant gold trophy—and more importantly, a voucher for a year's supply of the finest oats and carrots (turns out, donkeys prefer those over T-bones anyway).

Clemento: (Sighing as he helps Snarly up) "Well, Snarly, I guess the 'fast donkey' won after all. Back to the drawing board."

Digger: "Hey Durango, can we keep the Mega-Donkey wings? I feel like they make me look faster."

Durango: "Only for special occasions, Digger. Only for special occasions."

Should we end the story here with a big celebration, or should Clemento and Snarly try one last "peace offering" trick at the victory party?

A True Victory Celebration

The brothers are at the center of the Oakman town square, surrounded by cheering fans and a mountain of victory snacks. Digger is proudly wearing his gold trophy around his neck like a oversized necklace.

Across the square, he spots Clemento and Snarly trying to sneak away, looking defeated and hungry.

Durango: "Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

Clemento: (Freezing) "Uh, just headed back to the drawing board, Durango. No hard feelings about the... uh... 'special treats' and the scooter, right?"

Digger: "Actually, I wanted to thank you! If you hadn't tricked me into that 'Serpent Slide,' I never would have known I could run that fast. I'm the fastest snake-dodger in the West now!"

Dugger: "And we have enough victory carrots and oat-cakes to feed the whole county. It would be a waste to eat them all ourselves."

Durango: "Even though you played dirty, you're still part of the racing community. Come on over—the first round of oat-cakes is on us!"

Snarly's eyes light up. Clemento lets out a small, genuine smile and tips his hat.

Clemento: "You donkeys are far too kind. But don't think this means I'm going soft! Next year, I'm bringing a rocket-powered scooter."

Digger: "Bring it on, Clemento! I'll be ready for it!"

The sun sets over Oakman as the unlikely group of friends—and rivals—enjoys the feast together.

The End. 